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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SOME IN TURKMENBASHY UPBEAT, OTHERS
COMPLAIN OF TOUGH TIMES

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Conversations with local residents during a recent visit to the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashy revealed a mixture of attitudes, with several individuals expressing satisfaction with their lives and overall optimism about the city's longer-term prospects. Others, however, expressed their distress at the recent price hikes and the difficulty of finding decent-paying jobs. Hotel construction appears to be well underway in the Avaza tourist zone, a harbinger of coming changes. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) On May 21 PolOff paid a visit to Turkmenistan's main Caspian port city, Turkmenbashy and the nearby tourist zone of Avaza, which the government continues to hallucinate will become a major international seaside resort. The city's main market, located to the north of the city center, was bustling with activity. At 50,000 manat per kilo, the price of meat was cheaper than in Ashgabat (60,000 manat/kilo) and a bit more expensive than in the northern city of Dashoguz (45,000 manat/kilo). The large quantity of fresh fish for sale was indicative of the city's seaside location.

14. (SBU) At least three major new hotels are actively under construction in the Avaza tourist zone. The only major building project PolOff noticed in town, however, is a large hotel being erected in the city center, with no workers anywhere in sight. (COMMENT: Construction is evidently proceeding at a glacial pace on the latter project, since the spot was already marked on a 2005 city map as being the "Site of New Hotel Building," and one local said the hotel will probably not be finished until 2010. Avaza is clearly a higher priority for the government than Turkmenbashy itself. END COMMENT.)

SEVERAL LOCAL RESIDENTS SPEAK POSITIVELY ABOUT CITY LIFE

15. (SBU) Several Turkmenbashy residents described the city's quality of life positively in conversations with PolOff. One middle-aged ethnic-Turkmen man, who said he was a factory-worker at the city's large oil refinery, commented that however attractive the city may be at present, he was optimistic that better things are coming, both for Turkmenbashy itself and for Avaza. He suggested that PolOff should come back in 20 years to see for himself. Another young man, who said he worked as a taxi driver and a "businessman," seemed similarly sanguine about life in Turkmenbashy. He, too, was

optimistic that Avaza's development would bring good things to the local economy.

¶16. (SBU) A young ethnic-Azeri woman (age 23), a year-round resident of Avaza who said she worked as a telephone operator for the police, cheerily described her life in Turkmenbashi as good, although she added that in one year she plans to move permanently to Baku, where she is already having a house built. She said she is leaving mainly for family reasons, since she has many relatives in Azerbaijan. She said life in Turkmenbashi is currently cheaper than in Baku. However, with the way prices in Turkmenistan are rising, she thought that the cost of living soon might reach Baku's level, implying that there was no financial incentive to stay put. (NOTE: Turkmenbashi has historically had a large population of ethnic-Azeris, many of whom have lived in the city for generations. One ethnic-Azeri man, a third-generation resident of Turkmenbashi whose primary language was Russian, told PolOff how multi-ethnic the city had been during Soviet times, with ethnic-Turkmen constituting a minority behind Russians, Kazakhs, and Azeris. END NOTE.)

OTHER LOCALS LAMENT HIGH PRICES AND LACK OF JOBS

¶17. (SBU) One middle-aged ethnic-Turkmen woman named Bilbil talked about how difficult life had become over the past few months due to price increases. She said she cannot afford to buy meat for her family anymore, except for special occasions, and so they are eating more potatoes and macaroni. She claimed that many people are not getting enough vitamins. She said it is easier for her and her husband since they have only two children, but for larger families the price hikes are hitting hard. She noted that she was diagnosed with a brain tumor five years ago and so has the added expense of

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doctor visits, adding that the state does not help defray these costs.

¶18. (SBU) One ethnic-Azeri man named Namik (age 41) was more bitter about his life. Noting he is currently unemployed, he blamed his inability to get a job on fellow Turkmen coming from the northern province of Dashoguz, whom he claimed local bosses prefer to hire over locals because of their willingness to work for slave wages without complaining. He said he expected that the house he had lived in all his life would soon be demolished by the city, at which point he would be moved to an apartment elsewhere. He said he would prefer to emigrate to Azerbaijan if he could (Baku is now wealthy -- "like America"). He claimed that justice is only available for the rich, and suggested that "the women ought to get together and go to Ashgabat to try to let the president know about their hardships," since if the men ever tried to assemble, they would be arrested.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: While duly acknowledging Namik's grievances, it should be noted that there are likely other factors contributing to his societal marginalization. He is probably an alcoholic -- his breath smelled of alcohol, and at one point he asked PolOff for vodka money -- and he also noted that he is an ex-convict, having spent six years in a Soviet prison in the 1980s. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND